

Leftism in Indian Politics

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Leftism in Indian politics, a development of the years between the two wars, is at present represented by: the pro-Congress Socialist Party; the Communist Party of India; the Forward Bloc; and the two leftist splinters, M. N. Roy's Radical Democratic Party and the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India allied to the 4th International. It came of age only during World War II. To estimate the probable future role of the leftwing forces in India, it is necessary to assess the relative strength and weaknesses of the various parties through a brief recapitulation of the events which strongly influenced the development of these parties.

During the past quarter-century, the Indian National Congress, led by Gandhi, launched three mass movements (1919–21, 1929–32, 1942–45) which broadened the base of Congress by bringing within its fold both the workers and the peasants. The failure of the first non-violent civil disobedience movements impressed upon a small group of serious-minded patriotic young men the need of studying Marxian thought, and of studying the history of the October Revolution with a view to applying the lessons of that epoch-making event to Indian conditions. This group, formed in 1923 in Bombay, a city which provides the sharpest labor-capital relations in India, became the nucleus of the present-day Communist Party of India. Realizing the importance of the historical rôle of the working classes, it devoted its attention to organizing the industrial workers. Organization of workers meant a demand for better wages and improved living conditions. When this was not conceded, agitation and industrial unrest followed. The struggle of the workers became an integral part of the nationalist movement.

Gandhi, a reformer but not a revolutionary, did not favor industrial strikes. In the famous 1928 Bombay strike, he advised the workers' wives to refuse to see the faces of their husbands unless they returned to work. He has always advocated company unions, as opposed to trade unions. But other front-rank leaders encouraged organization of the workers. Jawaharlal Nehru, on his return from the conference

of the League against Imperialism and his visit to Moscow, became president of the All-India Trade Union Congress. Communist workers operated from within the ranks of Congress, although they did not always adhere to the Gandhi policy. In 1927, for instance, when Congress' goal was vague and indefinite, the infant Communist Party of India declared its objective to be a Union of Socialist Republics of India.

By their extremist policy and their part in industrial unrest, the Communists invited the heavy hand of a steel-frame bureaucracy obsessed with a fear of Bolshevik Russia. Police searches and trials for alleged conspiracy to deprive the King-emperor of his sovereignty over India became the order of the day, the most famous being the Meerut conspiracy trial of 1929–33. In 1934, when the active membership of the party stood at 150, it was banned. Communist workers, almost all of the present leadership, were harassed and hunted from place to place.

Meanwhile, the failure of the second civil disobedience movement led a number of young men, educated in foreign universities, to help Jai Prakash Narain found the Congress Socialist Party. The Party, whose patron-leader was Nehru, was weak. Because it lacked experience in working-class organization, it welcomed the Communists within its fold. The Communists took over the task of organizing the workers and the peasants, and left the Congress Socialists to maintain a close liaison with the Congress high command and to influence its policy. But the Socialists came to exercise a great influence over the peasant leagues, which federated into a central organization, the All-India Kisan Sabha, in 1936.

Through its election manifesto and the speeches of Nehru, Congress had promised far-reaching ameliorative measures to the workers and the peasantry. Once in office Congress ministries became conservative. Acting as a bridge between the Left and the Right, Nehru, then President of Congress, tried to influence the policy of the Congress Working Committee. He took three Socialists in his cabinet, among them Jai Prakash Narain. But this unity of Left and Right did not prove workable. Inside the Working Committee, Nehru was opposed and criticised for his leftish utterances. Indeed this opposition amounted to hostility from Vallabhbhai Patel, the dictatorial spokesman of the Right. Jai Prakash resigned from the committee, and it was only Gandhi's intervention which dissuaded Nehru from handing in his resignation.

Reaction triumphed in Congress leadership; at a time when firm action on Nehru's part would have led to a consolidation of the Left, he sat on the fence. One of the results of this policy of passivity was Subhas Bose's expulsion from Congress. The leftist bloc within Congress, feeling that the promises to the electorate had been belied organized industrial strikes and peasant demonstrations all over India. As was natural, this brought forth severe condemnation from the Right wing of Congress.

Nevertheless, it will be true to say that at this time Congress was a truly national body, a movement rather than a mere political party. It had within its ranks conflicting interests, like the industrialists and labor, landlords and peasants, Brahmins and Scheduled Castes, Hindus, Moslems, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, Socialists and Communists and elements of the extreme Right. Opposed to it were two communal organizations, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Moslem League, in order of political strength. Both these organizations represented the vested interests in the two communities. The League had been resuscitated by Mohammed Ali Jinnah in April, 1936, with the help of vested landed and monopoly interests in his community. He had told them. that Congress was going left, and that he was opposed to “all talk of hunger and poverty,” which “is intended to lead the people towards socialistic and communistic ideas for which India is far from prepared.” The Moslem League did not become a political organization representative of the Moslems until after the Pakistan demand was enunciated in 1940.

A War Against the War

At the outbreak of war nearly all political parties declared the war to be an imperialistic war, and withheld support unless a substantial degree of power was transferred to the Indian people. Socialists and Communists, working together at this time, organized popular demonstrations and strikes against the war effort. They called upon Gandhi to launch a mass movement to oust the British from India, and assured him of all support from the working classes and peasants. But Gandhi hoped to strike a bargain with imperialism, carried on protracted negotiations, using all his delaying tactics, called the war a “just” one and that he must support it “even when it is espoused by an enemy.” He declared that he would do anything but face “red ruin.”

Leftist workers organized large-scale strikes against the war effort and in support of workers’ demands for increased wages. In one place alone in 1940, 175,000 workers stayed away from work for 40 days. Countrywide arrests of workers’ leaders followed. At the beginning of 1941, the Government claimed that “out of 700 detained in jail without trial, about 480 persons were almost without exception either acknowledged Communists or else active supporters of the Communist program of violent mass revolution.” Among those arrested were followers of the Forward Bloc, formed by Subhas Bose, who disappeared from India and later found his way to Berlin and Tokio.

The German invasion of Russia and the Japanese conquest of Southeast Asia up

to Burma, brought about a decisive change in the orientation of the leftist parties in India. Nehru had called the war one of liberation against the forces of darkness and tyranny. The Communists too called it a peoples' war. They were as much concerned at the Japanese menace to India as the Socialists were not. Jai Prakash Narain, leader of the Socialists, said, "A slave has no obligation to defend his country; his only obligation is to break his chains of slavery." He wanted a war within a war, if Britain was not prepared to transfer power to Indian hands.

The British Government expressed willingness to hand over power if Congress and League and other elements in Indian life could agree among themselves. Congress refused to compromise on the issue of Pakistan, in spite of C. Rajagopalachari's campaign for the acceptance of the League's demand. The Communists too made themselves unpopular with Congress by supporting the League demand through their thesis advocating a re-division of India into 17 provinces, based on ethnic, cultural and economic affinities. Congress started preparing the country for a struggle, and the Government, realizing the rôle of the Communists within the working class, legalized the C.P.I. Before Congress could launch the mass movement, the Government arrested all the important leaders. The arrest was a signal for a countrywide spontaneous outburst of violence and sabotage; schools and colleges closed down; post offices, police stations and courts, symbolic of Britain's hold on India, were burnt down; communications were paralysed, and in a number of places, parallel governments set up Socialists characterized this sabotage movement as a full-scale revolution, and whipped up anti-British enthusiasm. For a time such activities raised the stock of the Congress Socialist party in the eyes of the middle class. Jai Prakash escaped from jail, led this underground movement, and tried, unsuccessfully, to cross Nepal's border to meet Subhas Bose, whose Indian National Army had launched an attack on the Manipur–Imphal–Kohima front.

Nevertheless, the Socialists did not succeed in keeping the workers and peasants from work. Here the Communist hold became stronger. The C.P.I. inhaled itself into the hearts of the workers and peasants. By their support of the workers' demands and their help in fighting against coercion, the C.P.I. came to secure the largest number of seats on the executive bodies of the 800,000-strong All-India Trade Union Congress, the 700,000-strong All-India Kisan Sabha. They were already in control of the All-India Students' Federation, with a membership of 70,000. Besides, since its inception, the party has been in control of the Progressive Writers' and Artists' Association, which today includes nearly all important writers and artists, particularly the under-forty talent. The membership of the party, 150 in 1934 and 4,400 in 1942, rose to 53,000 active members. The party is a very compact and well-

disciplined organization, demanding a high degree of political education. During the 1945 elections it contested 108 seats, and won nine, eight of them labor, polling 19% of the votes cast. The popularity of the party, which today occupies the same position as did the League in 1937, was again and again proven in the postal, railway and labor strikes and the R.I.N. and R.I.A.F. mutinies. Attempts made by the Congress Socialists to set up rival workers and peasants organizations have failed so far, in spite of the support of Congress now in office.

Communists in the League

Another significant development of the past few years has been the Communist infiltration into the ranks of the Moslem League. Starting with their support of the League demand, the process of infiltration was accelerated after 1942. More and more Communists joined the ranks of the League. They came to influence the local organs of the League organization in Bengal, Punjab, Sind, Assam and the Northwest frontier province. When League ministries were formed in four of these provinces, a struggle ensued between the ministerialists representing the vested landed and business interests, and the popular League organs in the provinces. The ministerialists found it difficult to placate the progressive sections, and on more than one occasion, Jinnah had to intervene on the side of the ministerialists. The provincial Leagues in the Punjab and Bengal drew up five-year plans for the economic development of the two provinces; these are very socialistic or communistic documents. So great was the enthusiasm they aroused that Jinnah had to follow it up and appoint a committee to draw up a five-year plan for the development of the Pakistan areas. The All-India leadership of the League is still reactionary, and it seems unlikely that the younger elements in the provinces will succeed in wresting the leadership for some time. The day Jinnah departs from the scene, however, there is little doubt about the hands into which the leadership of the Moslems will pass.

Although in the ranks of the Moslem League, the Communists exercise great influence, their influence in Congress is little. The Congress leaders after their release from jail in 1945, initiated a campaign led by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the "sledge hammer" of Congress, against the Communist Party of India. All key posts were denied to Communists; they were expelled from various provincial Congress organizations, and subsequently, they resigned from Congress to follow a Communist policy without any compromises of the united-front-with-Congress era. The Congress leadership has viewed this development with concern, and early in his career in the office of the Home and Information Ministry, a Member of the Govern-

ment of India, Sardar Patel, ordered countrywide searches of the Communist and Socialist Party headquarters and offices.

In order to enable the Socialists to win over the labor and peasant organizations from the Communists, the Congress high command advised them to drop the word. “Congress” from the name of their party, which they did in April, 1947. But as yet the Socialist Party of India has shown no new line of policy distinct from that of Congress, in spite of the fact that now the membership of the Socialist Party involves no obligation on a member’s part to be also a member of the All-India National Congress, as it was before. In the words of Jai Prakash Narain, the bond with Congress has not been “broken”; it has only been “loosened.” So far the Socialists have not succeeded in winning over the Bolshevik–Leninist Party of India or the followers of Bose. They must evolve a positive policy before they can be a really strong Left party in India.